

Tee-shirt Spirituality

All-ages Sunday, July 7, 2019

Homily by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones



Some of us wear tee-shirts to celebrate famous people and their legacy to the human family. A few years ago, I bought this tee shirt at the [Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library](#) (and museum) in Indianapolis. It shows an image of the blue, gray and black electric typewriter on which Vonnegut wrote most of his works. When I first visited the museum, the Smith-Corona typewriter was sitting on a short, rectangular table. Vonnegut used to sit at the table in a low chair near the floor. He leaned over the table to put his fingers on the keys and spin out short stories, novels, essays and speeches.

As an artist, he was driven to challenge conventional assumptions and expectations, like the Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau 100 years earlier. Hence, on the surface of his writing table, Vonnegut carved this quotation from Thoreau: “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.”

These words come from Thoreau’s book [Walden](#). It’s full of reflections on how the choices we make in the outside world reflect the values we hold inside us.

He writes: “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new *wearer* of clothes. If there is not a new [person], how can the new clothes be made to fit?”

These days, it’s easy to make ourselves look different or new and to present ourselves as we wish to be seen. But our outside choices or external changes won’t automatically change who we are or how we show up.

Thoreau says, let’s take some time and put some time into ourselves as the person who inhabits the clothes. Let’s work on the living breathing soul under the suit of clothes or under the tee shirt.

Another person who uses the image of clothing to refer to our values is the author of the New Testament’s Letter to the Colossians. The

writer uses the image of putting on clothes as a metaphor for a spiritual community’s commitments.

In chapter 3 of the letter, the writer asks: How shall we clothe ourselves? The writer answers it this way: “Put on your new self, your renewed self. Show to the world your renewal in the knowledge that God loves all of you.”

[The Letter to the Colossians is written under the name of the Apostle Paul, but many scholars reject that authorship.](#) Yet even with a fake byline, the writer uses a good image about how we treat one another.

What do we *put on*--spiritually or ethically-- in order to engage with others in our community and our family? That first century letter advises people to put on “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Giving advice to that growing congregation of Gentile Christians, the letter emphasizes patience and forgiveness as the key to getting along in community. It says: Let us clothe ourselves in love.

My interpretation of this passage for each of us is this: How do you prepare to meet the day? How does each one of us prepare to engage with people we have to interact with, talk to, cooperate with and rely on? How will we show up to those people?

How will we show up to those among us whom we care about the most? How will we show up to those we are encountering for the very first time?

This ancient advice recommends: Let us put on compassion and kindness.

When I was growing up, the night before a school day, my mother would lay out my clothes for me to put on the next morning. I didn’t always agree with her *taste* in my school clothes. That was the 1960s and 1970s, of course. What was groovy and in fashion for those times is--in the rear-view mirror of history--atrocious and embarrassing. The paisley shirts with oversized collars! The corduroy bell-bottoms! A pair of lavender jeans with rivets like silver ball bearings all up and down the seam. I kid you not.

Whether or not I really was a fashion victim in those days, it occurs to me now that my mother and I missed an opportunity for conversation as she laid out my clothes and I got ready for bed. The

two of us could have shared a ritual of reflecting on the day I had just experienced, and of listing my reasons for gratitude, and of naming the ones I loved and wishing them a blessing. We could have talked about the day to come and what I hoped for about the next day.

If you have children, I'm curious to know if you have tried conversations like this, or if you do try it sometime soon, I hope you'll let me know.

Either of my parents might have asked me such questions: "What do you think tomorrow will be like for you? What's coming up?" Perhaps I would have responded by talking about a special event coming up, or an assignment, or a stressful situation, encountering somebody who was mean.

Then they could have invited me to consider: "How do you want to prepare for the day? What attitude will you wear? Do you want to put on courage? Do you need to put on kindness, or a spirit of joy and fun, or what?" That kind of question is powerful, yet simple.

As I look back on my childhood, such a family conversation could have taken place at bedtime with one parent, or over cereal the next morning with the other parent.

I wonder what I would have said if they had asked me: "What kind of attitude would you like to wear today? I'm sure that in some particular years of growing up... my answer would have been *stone silence*, or at best a moan or a grumble. Even so, I bet I would have *remembered the question*.

What attitude would I wear to meet the day? Given the people I would be seeing and the tasks ahead for the day, what human virtues would be good to wear? Good questions on any day, for people at any age.

At some point, my mother ceased managing my wardrobe. *Thanks be to God*. I don't remember when I started making those choices—middle school?—high school? For most of my life, it's been my decision about what to wear for the day. Every day of the week, I have decided what to wear for the day—nice pants, or blue jeans? In summer, maybe it's a day for short pants. In winter, maybe I'll put on a long-sleeved shirt and a sweater. On a Sunday, I'll consider which tie to wear for church, except for today of course, when the tee-shirts come out.

What I put on for any given day depends on who will see me during the day, what roles I have to carry out, what the weather is going to be, and of course which clothes are clean that morning.

I wonder what it might be like if I were to consider what spiritual values I wanted to put on for the day. Such a reflection wouldn't have to take any more minutes than selecting a shirt and sweater would take. It would take only pausing to ask myself:

What will I deal with today?

Do I need to wear an attitude of mindfulness, to make sure I don't rush through the day without noticing it? Yes, on most days, mindfulness is a good thing to wear.

Whom will I meet with today? Do I need to put on patience? Yes, at times I do need an extra layer of patience.

Perhaps I'll clothe myself with kindness today for the comfort of my own spirit, and for the spirits of other people I will be around. *Clothe myself in kindness*.

You might consider doing that for your morning...or consider it before you go to bed if that's a better time of day for such contemplations.

Wardrobe management as occasion for spiritual discernment—let's consider it. Let's consider the questions:

How shall we show up for this new day? By wearing thankfulness? Wearing generosity?

What values do we put on for the day? Put on compassion and kindness? Put on patience?

The act of choosing a tee shirt, a tie, a dress, or a pair of shoes to wear on a given day could remind us to make some spiritual choices:

How will we show up for the day? What attitude will we put on? In what values and intentions do we wish to clothe ourselves on this day?

May we try out and examine ways to make any of our daily rituals of life an occasion for considering the gifts of life and sharing those gifts.

May our days be blessed with intention and awareness and gratitude. May every day show us its blessings, and may it show us how we are called to bring our blessings into the world. Amen.